DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 240 CE 083 602

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TITLE	Career Development for Meaningful Life Work. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CE-02-237
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	4p.; Digest Number 237.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0013
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, College of Education, The Ohio State University, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090. For full text: http://www.ericacve.org/pubs.asp.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; *Career Development; Career Education; Constructivism (Learning); *Happiness; *Job Satisfaction; *Job Satisfaction; *Life Satisfaction; Quality of Working Life; Self Actualization; Self Concept; Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Values; Well Being; Work Attitudes; Work Ethic
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Self Reflection

ABSTRACT

Achieving meaningful life work is a process that involves aligning one's work with one's true essence or core self. It is an ongoing process that involves self-reflection to discover the deep passions within and then exploration of how to bring those passions or interests to bear in meaningful ways at work. In response to the need to address the evolving concept of meaningful work, a new construct known as career happiness has emerged. Career happiness results when individuals find or develop careers that allow them to express their core identities and values, that tap into their true essence. Career development theories such as constructivism, adaptability, planned happenstance, and connecting spirit and work support the development of careers that are purposeful and meaningful. (Contains 16 references.) (YLB)

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ERIC Digest no. 237

by Susan Imel
2002
EDO-CE-02-237

Career Development for Meaningful Life Work

This above all, to thine own self be true. (Shakespeare)

I think there is a "sweet spot" that each of us has....It's the kind of work we want to perform, the kind of work that makes us proud. But finding that sweet spot requires deep self-knowledge. You start by looking at the work you are drawn to. You try it, you evaluate the experience, and you evolve as you discover more about it. I think of this process as developmental self-interrogation. You're working on a mental model of yourself—always. (Larry Smith, quoted in Warshaw 1998)

The attacks of September 11, 2001 prompted many people to ask "What am I doing with my life?" (Cannon 2002, p. 44) and "Am I really living the way that I want to live?" (Boyatzis, McKee, and Goleman 2002, p. 87). Some individuals have responded by changing to careers that have more meaning for them; for example, one woman left a secure job in manufacturing to help homeless women in the Chicago area (Cannon 2002). Although the traumatic and shocking events of that day caused many individuals to stop and take stock of their careers, others have been quietly seeking more satisfying and meaningful work lives for a number of years. An article titled, "Boomers Trade Security for Freedom," published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on March 19, 2001, for example, began with the statement "many baby boomers, unfulfilled by corporate jobs at which they've worked for years, are deciding to give up the great pay and benefits to do what they want to do" (Hudson 2001, p. 8). These examples support emerging perspectives that view work as an expression of meaning. Many individuals are no longer satisfied with working for a living but instead want to work *at* living (Boyatzis, McKee, and Goleman 2002). Career development theory and practices that foster the development of meaning in work are reviewed in this *Digest*.

The Work-Meaning Connection

Several years ago, a Wall Street Journal/ABC News poll reported that nearly 50% of all those working in the United States would choose a new type of work if they had the chance (Warshaw 1998). Why do so many people feel dissatisfied with their work? The answer is complex and multifaceted. We live in an age where work has become "more personal than ever—when who you are is what you do—a deeper source of personal satisfaction than ever" (ibid., online, n.p.). Many are reexamining their careers in light of the growing realization that work should be more than a job. Instead of listening to internal signals, many individuals make choices about work and careers on the basis of external criteria such as income potential, status, and the opinions of others. Although they may achieve success in these careers, they may be unhappy and dissatisfied because their work is not aligned with who they are—their "core self" (Clark 1999-2000). Others may select careers based on their aptitudes—things they are good at doing—but just like external criteria these aptitudes may not reflect their "deep interests," that is, the things that really make them happy (Webber 1998).

According to Timothy Butler and James Waldroop, examining the terminology used to describe work can help unravel some of the questions about choosing work that is meaningful. Although the term "career" is used most frequently, the term "vocation" is more profound because it has to do with doing work that makes a difference and that has meaning. The Latin word *vocare*, which means "to call," is the root of the word vocation. A vocation is a calling that one has to listen for. It is not immediately recognizable and one has to be attuned to the message for it to be heard (Webber 1998). Finding meaningful work, therefore, involves listening for those internal signals that signify "deep interests" and then allowing the interests to lead to work that is aligned with a "core self."

Job Satisfaction and Career Happiness

Traditional vocational or career guidance grew out of the needs of the modern industrial era and focused on measuring individual differences or traits and then using this information to match people to occupations. Part of this tradition was measuring job satisfaction through a positive evaluation of individuals' attitudes toward their jobs. Career satisfaction measures concentrated on correlating external job factors with global measures of satisfaction (Henderson 1999-2000; Savickas 2000). Job satisfaction also depended on an individual's ability to recognize and follow his or her interests (Henderson 2000). According to Henderson (1999-2000), when "the popular literature began suggesting deeper meaning in work...these traditional studies and assessment techniques began to have an empty ring" for both individuals and career development professionals (p. 6).

In response to the need to address the evolving concept of meaningful work, a new construct known as career happiness has emerged (Henderson 1999-2000, 2000). As defined by Henderson (ibid.) and a number of colleagues (see the Winter 1999-2000 issue of ***Career Planning and Adult Development Journal***), career happiness results when individuals find or develop careers that allow them to express their core identities and values, that tap into their true essence. According to Henderson (1999-2000), "Career happiness appears to have emerged more from philosophy, mythology, and psychology, than from the existing job satisfaction literature" (p. 6). Theories underlying the construct include the following (adapted from Henderson 1999-2000, p. 6):

- Concept of true self and its potential (Maslow and Kiekergaard)
- Concepts of innate self and potentiality related to processes for psychological healing (Jung and Carl Rogers)
- Mythological processes for self-discovery and self-expression in career and life stage development that honor life journeys of profound purpose and meaning (Joseph Campbell)
- Concept of serendipity that enable individuals to take advantage of unexpected or chance events (Bandura)
- Optimal experience as critical determinants of personal happiness (Csikszentmihalyi)

Career happiness is connected to human development and is influenced by developmental processes (Harris 1999-2000). Career happiness may result "when career activities, challenges, and environments support, gently challenge, and resonate with fundamental developmental tasks," but as an individual grows and changes, activities that once resulted in career happiness may not continue to be meaningful (ibid., p. 28).

A study (Henderson 2000) of eight people who experienced career happiness revealed that the participants had the following personality traits: a positive sense of self, self-determination, energy, strength of character, positive and productive relationships with others, and a positive relationship to the world. Work environments contributed to their career happiness by providing freedom and autonomy, challenges, a positive social atmosphere, and the opportunity to make personally meaningful contributions.

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Developments in Career Development Theory

A number of recent developments in career development theory support the concept of meaningful work:

- **Constructivism.** The search for meaningful work is connected to constructivism with its emphasis on deriving meaning from experience. As a part of their career development, individuals can construct careers that are personally meaningful and self-managed. To have meaningful careers, individuals will need to reflect on their experiences and make the changes necessary to keep their careers aligned with their values and interests (Patton 2000; Savickas 2000).

- **Career adaptability.** Career adaptability emphasizes making career changes without great difficulty to fit new or changing circumstances. It involves both an ability to cope with the predictable tasks of career development such as preparing for and finding a job as well as a future orientation that allows individuals to improve the match between their internal job description and the external world on a continuing basis (Plimmer et al. 1999-2000; Savickas 1997). It "involves planful attitudes, self- and environmental exploration, and informed decision making," (Savickas 1997, p. 254).

- **Planned happenstance.** Planned happenstance is a theory that helps individuals develop skills to recognize, create, and use chance in career development. Closely related to both constructivist notions of career development and career adaptability, it requires individuals to exercise curiosity to explore new learning opportunities, to persist despite setbacks, to meet changing attitudes and circumstances with flexibility, to optimistically view new opportunities as possible and attainable, and to take risks by being proactive in the face of uncertain outcomes (Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz 1999).

- **Connecting spirit and work.** The idea that work has a dimension that is spiritual or carries with it a sense of harmony is connected to meaningful work (Bloch 1999-2000). When individuals connect what they really like to do with what they do for pay and when they are absorbed in that work, they have achieved a connection between their spirit and their work. Career development plays a role in this process by helping individuals discover their needs, interests, and values and understand the nature of work and occupations, and then by assisting in bringing the two areas together. Meaning lies in how the two areas are merged. (Bloch 1997). Bloch (1997) suggests the practice of intentionality—a process of using the mind to influence events outside one's self—as a way of creating career changes that will lead to more meaningful work.

Conclusion

Achieving meaningful life work is a process that involves aligning one's work with one's true essence or core self. It is an ongoing process that involves self-reflection to discover the deep passions within and then exploring how to bring those passions or interests to bear in meaningful ways in work (Clark 1999-2000). Career development theories such as constructivism, adaptability, and planned happenstance support the development of careers that are purposeful and meaningful. As described in the literature reviewed for this *Digest*, career development for meaningful life work has a middle-class orientation. The concepts discussed do not address gender, class, or race, and they are also reflect Western culture in their emphasis on the individual.

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0013. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. *Digests* may be freely reproduced and are available at <http://ericacve.org/digests.asp>.

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